

New report stresses immediacy of global warming

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Wednesday, June 17, 2009

(06-17) 04:00 PDT Washington - --

Top government scientists on Tuesday warned that climate change already is wreaking devastating changes on the United States, threatening the Southwest with blistering heat, the Atlantic Coast with dangerous hurricanes and the Midwest with flooding.

The alarms were delivered in a nearly 200-page report, begun by the Bush administration, that documents how the changing climate is reshaping U.S. coastlines and could affect American agriculture.

The report finds that U.S. temperatures rose about 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit in the past 50 years, and it projects that without major changes there could be an additional 2 to 11 degrees of additional warming this century.

The study also includes a new forecast about how quickly oceans will rise because of melting glaciers and the greater volume of warmer water. The report predicts that sea levels will rise by 3 to 4 feet during this century. That could leave some coastal communities under water.

Because two-thirds of the nation's oil and gas imports come through the Gulf of Mexico, "vital energy and transportation infrastructure will be at risk with expected sea level rise and associated storm surge," said Jerry Melillo, director of the Ecosystems Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass. He's one of the study's authors.

Thomas Karl, director of the National Climatic Data Center, predicted that "extreme heat waves, which are currently rare, will become much more common in the future," even as the U.S. population ages, and that could increase the number of deaths from heat-related illnesses.

Other scientists involved in the study, including Commerce Under Secretary Jane Lubchenco, said they hope that the report's focus on the immediate repercussions of global warming - rather than just effects that might not be felt for decades - will inject urgency into the climate change debate.

"Much of the foot-dragging in addressing climate change is a reflection of the perception that climate change is way down the road, it's in the future, and that it only affects remote parts of the planet," Lubchenco said. "This report ... provides the concrete scientific information that says unequivocally that climate change is happening now, and it is happening in our own back yards

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and it affects the kinds of things people care about."

The Obama administration has made countering climate change a top priority, and House Democrats are advancing legislation that would place new national limits on the amount of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases that businesses can emit into the atmosphere.

Most House Republicans oppose the legislation, which also is viewed warily by many moderate Democrats worried that the new pollution caps could chill industrial activity, jeopardizing U.S. businesses and jobs.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who is spearheading the Senate's push for climate change legislation, said the report would "add urgency to the growing momentum in Congress for legislation that cuts global warming pollution."

Some Republicans, including Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., and Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, have expressed skepticism that global warming is both real and a product of human activities.

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